

Riots Could Resume in Suburbs on First Anniversary

PARIS, Oct 23, 2006 (AFP) - The French police intelligence agency warned Monday that tensions are at fever-pitch in the high-immigration suburbs hit by last year's riots and told the government to prepare for a possible new flare-up on the anniversary later this week.

In a secret report quoted in Le Figaro newspaper, the General Intelligence (RG) agency said that "most of the conditions that a year ago led to the unleashing of collective violence across a large part of France, are still in place."

The warning was made public a day after clashes between police and rioters who set fire to a bus in the southern Paris suburb of Grigny. Over the past four weeks police say they have been the targets of a series of ambushes in the Paris outskirts.

The RG said that the situation was particularly tense in the northeastern suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, where the accidental deaths of two youths in an electrical sub-station on October 27 last year sparked three weeks of nationwide disturbances.

Though the town was relatively quiet at the moment, "it could at any moment tip over into violence," the report said.

The whole of the Ile-de-France region — greater Paris — "is the source of very deep concern... it is to be feared that tensions get more acute as we approach October 27," it said.

Nearly 10,000 cars and 200 buildings were torched in the 2005 riots, which cast an unflattering light on France's problems in integrating its large immigrant communities of black and Arab origin.

Violence subsided after the government of President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency — a measure not enacted since the war in Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Some 3,000 people were arrested and 120 police injured.

In recent days police unions have sounded the alarm about a resurgence of violence in the poor Paris outskirts, warning that youths seemed more intent than before on physically attacking officers on patrol.

In Sunday's incident a gang hijacked a bus in the early afternoon at the Grande Borne estate, ordered the passengers off and then doused the vehicle in petrol and set it alight. Clashes with riot police lasted three hours.

"At the Grande Borne, the youths went one notch further in their provocation. Some of them are trying with all their power to get us to do something stupid, so they can justify their violence and spread it," Frédéric Lagache of the Alliance police union told Le Parisien newspaper.

"We have the feeling that some in the difficult neighbourhoods want to have a replay of the riots.... The nearer we get to the anniversary, the more poisonous the atmosphere," he said.

Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy said that there "is no advance sign as yet of any new riots," but officials have noted that the approaching half-term holiday could — as happened last year — encourage trouble by leaving youths with time on their hands.

The RG report said there had been an increase in suburban violence in the last two months, with 7,327 incidents recorded in September — up by 350 from August.

It warned that the next outbreak of violence could be "less spontaneous and more structured, encouraging people to attack one of the last public institutions remaining in some neighbourhoods: the police."

The opposition Socialist Party (PS) seized upon the report, pointing the finger at Sarkozy's security tactics and the social policies of the centre-right government.

"What is happening in these neighbourhoods is not just a question of security or law enforcement," party spokesman Julien Dray told reporters.

"The promises made in the wake of last year's riots have not been kept," he charged, accusing the government of starving social workers, local associations and teachers of the support they need.

But Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a contender for the PS nomination in next year's presidential elections and himself deputy mayor of a flashpoint Paris suburb, warned not to "poison the problem in the name of the election campaign"